

Dear Members of the Education Committee, My name is Iliana Zunigs and I'm from Norwalk. Thank you for your time.

I am writing to you today to express my support of H.B. 5283, and changes to ECS generally, which will help ensure all students are funded based on their learning needs, and that they receive the full education funding they are entitled to.

The last two years have made it clearer than ever that not every student is given the resources they need in order to experience the top-notch education CT prides itself on. Here in Norwalk, we are presented unique issues the vast majority of the state does not deal with.

It is very obvious that there are serious, structural racial and economic disparities between different districts across the state. Our educators, parents, and, most importantly, students, have had to navigate unprecedented situations in and out of the classroom, and for districts that do not have adequate resources to educate their students, these situations have been even more difficult. This is particularly true in Norwalk.

I am the parent of two boys, my oldest being a 10th grader and my youngest is an 8th grader here in Norwalk Public Schools. In the early months of the pandemic, my loving youngest son became anxious and afraid. He was depressed due to being home from school and an inability to socially interact normally with his friends and peers. He was later diagnosed medically with severe anxiety and OCD. Thankfully, Norwalk was able to bring our kids back in-school as an option quite early compared to other districts, and for this we are thankful. Federal and private investment helped with this. But the pressing need to make up for lost time is palpable. Our children have had to face academic, mental, emotional, and sometimes physical breakdowns and ramifications that none of us as parents have had to face. The pandemic exasperated the needs in a district like ours; one that is consistently burdened by the dichotomy between our relatively high property values and enormous needs of our ELL and ESL kids. Unfortunately, my district was NOT able to use all of its federal dollars to account for these needs, as our district was forced to use much of these funds for regular operating expenses. This is because we fall far into a perennial donut when it comes to ECS funding, even with the new formula. Eventually, federal funding is going to run out. More than ever, communities require greater resources to meet the needs of their students and they cannot wait for ECS dollars to be phased in over the next six years.

The State of Connecticut needs to provide our students with the funding they need in order to be successful. I want my child to ALWAYS have access to counseling services, be able to study in a building that has enough ventilation, and to never have to adjust to their teacher leaving midway through the year due to the undue stress that chronic underfunding has created.

All of our students deserve to be funded based on what they need to be successful. English Learners, students who are economically disadvantaged, and students navigating through their education in communities that experience concentrated poverty all deserve to be funded at a level that makes a real, tangible difference. And this is true regardless of the type of public school students attend.

Norwalk needs your help. I am lucky to be financially able to provide assistance to my children when and if they require it, but a huge percentage of our city is unable to. This is the dichotomy of Norwalk; a melting pot of the haves and have-nots. We need fresh eyes on ECS. Any supplemental, recurring funding we can be provided to create a more equitable environment and to prevent the annual budget struggle we endure is necessary now more than ever.

I'm counting on all of you to take every single student into account when you're making decisions about how to fund education, and to give all of our students a fighting chance to not only succeed, but excel. Funding our students fully, equitably, and immediately is long overdue, and I urge you to support H.B. 5283.

Sincerely, Iliana Zuniga. Norwalk